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Making Sense of Religious Experience and the ‘Problem of Belief’ in Fieldwork

Karen Lauterbach

Introduction

What first came to mind when thinking about the title for this article¹ was a chameleon; a chameleon because of its ability to change colour according to the surroundings and to adapt itself to changing circumstances. Experiences of adapting oneself to changing contexts and surroundings are central to this text. I refer more concretely to reflections around belief and experiences of being ‘more or less religious’ when doing fieldwork in Pentecostal/charismatic churches in Africa. The article discusses the analytical implications of how we understand and approach religious experience and how this is related to what we do when doing fieldwork. The article argues that rather than seeing religious experience (belief) as an inner state and as a question of being a believer/non-believer (either/or), religious experience can take different expressions and forms. Moreover, these experiences inform our understanding of the religious lives of the people we study. I do not intend to omit the category of belief altogether, but propose a way of approaching it that is less defined along binary categories and more defined in a flexible way and as related to religious practices. I propose to analyse different experiences of belief as different *degrees of belief* that are strongly related to and activated by contextual situations. Instead of approaching belief as an inner state and as separated from more material expressions of religion, I emphasise the role of religious practices and rituals for understanding religious experience.

¹ This article was first presented at the seminar ‘Researching the Enchanted World: Positioning ourselves in anthropology of Christianity and studies in world Christianity’ at Lund University, 26-27 March 2013. I would like to thank Mika Vähäkangas for inviting me to present the paper, the other presenters (Joel Robbins, Naomi Haynes, Jan-Åke Alvarsson and Carl Sundberg) for sharing their personal experiences and reflections, the discussant (Brian Howell) and the seminar participants for comments and stimulating discussions. I am also grateful to my colleagues at the Centre of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, and in particular Amanda Hammar and Niels Kastfelt for commenting on my early ideas.

In 2012 and 2013 I did fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda in two Congolese congregations. It was my first time in Uganda as most of my former fieldwork experience was in West Africa. I was, in many ways, on foreign ground and in an unknown physical and cultural landscape. In this context of unfamiliarity I was surprised about how much I felt at home in these two Congolese churches. Having done fieldwork in Pentecostal churches over the last fifteen years in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Denmark, I knew what was happening. Despite differences related to context, I recognised the rituals, the way of praying, the deliverance sessions, the collection of offerings and tithes, the joyful singing, and in particular how I was received and included. I knew how to take part and also how the relationship between insider and outsider was established and negotiated. It was a known space in a foreign land. The recognition I experienced was intellectual as well as bodily; intellectual because I had a profound knowledge of Pentecostalism and bodily because when it came to singing, dancing, and praying my body was remembering and acting without considering ethical questions of whether I was an insider or outsider; a believer or a non-believer. It was a sense of being at home in an already known and experienced religious landscape.

In this article I will discuss what this experience tells us about belief and why it was surprising. First, I will briefly give an account of how religious belief and ‘the problem of belief’ has been approached in the anthropological literature on religion and particularly in Christianity. Second, I will provide descriptions of three different fieldwork experiences (Burkina Faso, Ghana and Uganda). Third, I will discuss these experiences in relation to my ideas around belief as *degrees of belief*, and the importance of being open to the category of belief.

‘The Problem of Belief’

One of the central questions when reflecting on doing fieldwork and research on the religious lives of people is the insider / outsider question or the influence of one’s own religious identity (Bielo 2013). Can one conduct good and solid fieldwork if one does not believe? What does it require to understand the religious lives of other people and how do we best approach it? These and other related questions touch upon how we produce knowledge and are central to all ethnography on religion, as Bielo points out: ‘Because of what is at stake: the richness of our data, the trustworthiness of our accounts, the reliability of our analysis; in short the quality of our craft’ (Bielo 2013: 1).

As discussed by Engelke (2002), anthropologists such as Evans-Prichard and Victor Turner were occupied with the relationship between their fieldwork methods and being a believer or a non-believer, and of the necessity of understanding from the inside in order to better understand the religious lives of others (2002: 4). Engelke discusses the relation between belief as that inner state and belief as method, in the sense of being a way to get access to the feelings, emotions and life worlds of other people. In this discussion, Engelke raises the important question of what understanding of belief this concern builds on and furthermore of where this particular understanding of belief as inner state comes from. Making reference to Ruel (1997) he asks 'if their understanding of belief and the "inner life" is a specifically Christian – even Catholic – viewpoint' (Engelke 2002: 8). So whereas Engelke is interested in the implications of belief or non-belief for doing fieldwork, the aim here is first to discuss how we understand belief and religious life more generally and how fieldwork experiences can inform us about perceptions of belief.

Scholars writing on religion and religious encounters in non-Western contexts have questioned the Christian understanding of belief as an internal affair. Ruel, for instance, discusses the relationship and history of the notions of trust and belief in his book on the religious life of the Kuria and proposes to study the religious lives of people through rituals rather than belief (1997) (see also Englund 2007). Keane, in his work on religion and missionary encounters, stresses the need for considering religion not only as a matter of faith, but argues that the effect and role of Christianity should be understood in terms of 'the portability and intimacy of specific practices as well' (Keane 2007: 68). He draws attention to the role of religious practices and religious materiality and points out that these are not always separable from more secular practices (ibid.).²

Fieldwork Experiences

My positioning with regard to the role of belief and non-belief when doing fieldwork has been formed through my fieldwork experiences over the past fifteen years. My most recent experience, of feeling more religious when

² Other relevant literature that discusses the Western construction of belief, how this is linked to a particular period in the making of Christianity, and the analytical implications of using the category are, amongst others: Asad (1993, 2003) Day (2010), Harding (1991), Lindquist and Coleman (2008), Robbins (2003).

being among Congolese Pentecostals in Uganda, stood in contrast to former experiences when doing fieldwork in Pentecostal churches in Burkina Faso and Ghana. Here I first felt very awkward, blasphemous, and later deliberately took a stance as an outsider. What I try to illustrate through the following descriptions of fieldwork experiences is not only that belief might take shape according to context, but also that it matters to take part in and to be open to belief; not only as an ethnographic task but also as a personal (and embarrassing) possibility (Engelke 2002: 3).

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso – 1999

My first fieldwork experience in Pentecostal churches was in 1999 when I went to Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso to do fieldwork for my master's thesis. The thesis explored how young people narrated their conversion experiences and how they drew on these when making sense of their everyday life in the urban context of Ouagadougou. I spent three months in the 'Temple Emmanuel' church of the Assemblies of God, which was one of the big Pentecostal churches in Ouagadougou at the time. I lived at a guest house at the premises of the evangelical churches' head office and had daily contact and many informal conversations with church members, staff and pastors who dropped by to visit the office or me. I participated in church related activities several times a week: Sunday services, singing and practicing with the youth choir, prayer meetings, and youth meetings.

The first Sunday I attended church service I was presented by the head pastor as a Danish student who wanted to talk to young church members. I was also asked to present myself, as is the practice in many Pentecostal churches when you visit the church for the first time. After the church service a number of young people approached me and they became my informants. My ambition was to understand what it meant to be young and evangelical in Ouagadougou and, in order to gain this understanding, I wanted to be as open and unprejudiced as possible. My challenge was twofold: I had to challenge my own understandings of what was rational and irrational and at the same time I was challenged in terms of what being a religious person or a Christian meant for me and for the people I had conversations with.

In relation to the first aspect of my challenge I was fascinated and puzzled by young people's conversion. Were these people active agents capable of choosing and rejecting various aspects and relations in their lives? Or were

they young people living in a city experiencing chaos and crises and in need of a new moral community and set of social rules? At the more personal level I had difficulties understanding how young people could make the decision to become born again; how could it make sense to someone to think about religion in such absolute terms? And yet, in order to get insight into this question, I had to put into play my own identity as a believer / non-believer and Christian.

I presented myself as a protestant, and as being a member of the Danish Lutheran Church, which I am. But being a protestant in Burkina Faso and in Denmark had two very different meanings. In Denmark it means being member of the state church and not necessarily much more than that. Whereas in Burkina Faso being a protestant implied being an evangelical, as there were at the time only protestant churches of a Pentecostal or an evangelical orientation in the country. Presenting myself as a protestant was a way for me to enter the field, both in the sense of being accepted as an insider or a Christian and also in the sense of allowing myself to be open to what I was experiencing. However, I soon had problems with identifying myself as a protestant because I felt there was a discrepancy between my actions and my (lack of) inner belief. Was I sincere?

The following quote from my master's thesis illustrates my reflections on my positioning with regard to religion and belief:

I had before travelling thought about how to deal with my own religiosity as I would probably be asked about this. I was in no way interested in identifying myself so much that it would imply converting [here as a born-again], but I expected to be able to observe from the side-line. This turned out to be pure utopia, as I was always encouraged to take part in singing and praying. This was my greatest challenge – a challenge to my own ethics, to my own relation to religion and to taking other people seriously. I quickly got qualms about letting others perceive me as a protestant and at times I felt that I was behaving in a blasphemous way. For instance during long prayers in church service, where everyone prays at the same time; I could not stand without saying anything and I therefore pretended and tried to pray. But at the same time I felt unethical about pretending doing something, while other people next to me were very engaged in their actions. I noticed that it was in particular in relation to praying that this uneasiness occurred, because you can discern people's relation to God through their way of praying – do they pray in an intense and engaged way? (Lauterbach 2000: 24).

My concerns reflected an understanding of belief as an inner state, of something that is inside a person and is expressed in individual actions such as prayers. It is also something that distinguished a believer from a non-believer, me from the others. It reflected an understanding that having presented myself as a protestant entailed that I should feel in a certain way during church services. But the feeling of being blasphemous also reflected the observation that proving and showing to be a genuinely religious person takes place in certain practices and involves relations with other people. Nobody asked me whether I was a believer or not, but I was asked on several occasions to pray, e.g. after practicing with the youth choir, which indicates that what mattered here was taking part in a religious practice more than my inner state. The feeling of being religious became intensified towards the end of my stay; I had spent time with young church members, had spent time in church, and started to think about the young people and conversion differently (which in a sense is the aim of ethnographic fieldwork). I had become familiar with the moral codes and cognitive schemes of the church and of Pentecostalism, and at one particular occasion when a pastor asked if anyone would come forward and give his or her heart to Jesus I thought 'now I understand how conversion makes sense to these young people'.

Kumasi, Ghana – 2004 & 2005

Six years later in 2004 and 2005 I did fieldwork in several small neo-Pentecostal churches in Kumasi, Ghana. This time my concern was somewhat different. I was doing fieldwork for my Ph.D. dissertation that was about the pastors of these small churches and their career trajectories. I was therefore not attached to one particular church, but followed pastors and their networks. I was interested in how pastors achieve status, wealth and power through becoming a pastor and how this is recognised in society (Lauterbach 2008).

Given my former experiences (cf. above) I was, before leaving, very concerned with how to present myself with regard to religious affiliation and belief. Should I (again) pretend to be a Christian, a protestant, a believer? I had been advised by a fellow Ph.D. student to think about it carefully and had a conversation with the pastor at my university about the issue. My solution was this time to marginalise myself as a person, to pay less attention to the religious aspects of my anthropological 'I', and not to engage too much in discussions about my own belief. With this attitude I hoped to

become less of a target for proselytizing efforts and to focus on what I was there to study rather than me.

I had, in other words, distanced the problem of my own belief, and my earlier ethical problems were not a concern. This time I again presented myself as a member of the Danish Lutheran Church, which in this context implied that I was not a born-again. I took part in church activities and services in a number of churches. Maybe due to not being attached to one particular church, many pastors seemed eager to negotiate my involvement and participation in their churches. Some tried to make me convert, sometimes by asking me to read from the Bible and other times by making me take part in certain church rituals. But it was not only a question of my conversion; it was also about pastors proving to their church members that they were spiritually strong pastors and able to attract someone from outside to their church.

The following example illustrates how being involved is about more than personal faith, but also about performance and participation in rituals. One Sunday in February 2005 I was attending a church service in a small Pentecostal church in Kumasi, Ghana. I already knew the pastor (Francis) who was preaching and we had had several conversations about his pastoral career. It was not in Francis' church. At that time he was not affiliated with any particular church. He explained himself that he was independent and was moving around and preaching in various churches. He had been asked to preach by the head pastor, who was also his former colleague and friend. The church was newly established and had around 100 members. The church was located on a plot of land next to mechanics and garages and consisted of an unfinished concrete floor with a tin roof and wood covering most of the sides. After preaching Francis announced (spontaneously) a collection of money to buy bags of cement to finish the construction of the church building. People could pledge how many bags they wanted to give. My assistant, who was a Catholic, also offered to buy a few cement bags. I was among the few who did not offer or pledge. When people had offered they went in front of the church and the pastor prayed and laid his hand on them. Several people fell on the ground, especially the younger girls. They were prayed for again by the pastor.

Although I had not participated in the offering I was asked to step forward so the pastor could pray for me. I went to the front of the church where all the people who had given were standing. Francis laid his hand on my forehead

and prayed. I instantly felt a hard pressure from his hand and had to step backwards in order not to fall on the ground. I resisted and pushed back, because I did not want to fall. In my eyes that would have been compromising the academic distance to what I was studying.

But what was at stake? Was I being tested? Or was the focus of the performance the pastor rather than me? I did not interpret this event as a question of belief. It was rather a way for the pastor to include me in a religious practice and thereby negotiate the level of my involvement. But it was more than that; it was also a way for the pastor to prove to the other church attendants and pastors that he was spiritually strong. He would have displayed his spiritual power if he could get me to fall down while he was praying for me. What seems important to me is performance and the social approval of spiritual power. What was important for Francis was not so much whether I was a believer or not, but rather proving to the audience that he was a strong and genuine pastor, and he could do that by making me be touched by his spiritual power.

Kampala, Uganda – 2012 & 2013

The last fieldwork experience I will draw and reflect upon is my most recent fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda. I did fieldwork for a total of three months in small Congolese Pentecostal congregations and I spent most of my time in two of these churches. I was studying how these Congolese congregations assist and help church members and others who have come to Kampala as forced migrants and how experiences of displacement influence the religious lives and practices of people (Lauterbach 2013).

I was working with a Ugandan woman who took care of making all contacts and also did some translation. She was herself member of a Ugandan Pentecostal church and had formerly assisted a Ph.D. student from the UK who conducted fieldwork in a Pentecostal church in Kampala. This experience somehow influenced our entry into these two churches. My research assistant would for instance insist on us sitting towards the back of the church so that we could better observe what was going on, instead of sitting in the front as would be expected from us as guests visiting the church. Our involvement with the churches was somewhat fluctuant in the sense that we only occasionally attended Sunday services, and otherwise a few church related activities. We engaged with people and informants on a more

individual basis. However, while we were in church we were participating and involved in singing, praying, dancing etc.

Despite this pull towards having a more professional attitude when doing fieldwork, my experiences of being in these churches were different from the former ones described above. As mentioned in the beginning of the article, I was in Uganda for the first time and in a new physical and cultural landscape. In this situation of not knowing, I experienced a contrast and a sense of familiarity when being in the churches; a form of bodily recognition and a somewhat surprising feeling of being at home.

Because of my prior work I knew what was going on and was familiar with how a church service was conducted (the rituals, ways of praying, deliverance sessions). I also knew that my involvement in the church would be negotiated and that my mere presence in church could, by some, be seen as an advantage and as something to use. Therefore I was prepared to handle being received and included, which also entailed questions around religious affiliation and faith. But I was also prepared in the sense that my body was remembering and acting when it came to singing and praying, and interestingly this made questions of whether I was an insider or outsider and a believer or a non-believer less prominent.

This feeling of being at home was connected to and gave rise to the above mentioned feeling of being 'more religious' when being in these churches than when being at home. This was closely connected to my participation in religious practices, but also to my mere presence in a religious space.

There were also attempts from the pastors to negotiate my attachment to the churches, either in the form of finding sponsors for the churches and the work they did for Congolese refugees in Kampala or through involving me actively in rituals. The following example illustrates how engagement is being negotiated through the participation in religious practices. One Sunday during service an assistant pastor revealed that he had had a vision about a white lady being involved in a car accident. He explained that the white lady was me. I was asked to come forward in the church and to kneel down. Franco, the pastor, laid his hand on my head and he and the other church attendants prayed for me. I had planned a trip out of Kampala the following day with my family and I felt slightly worried about the road insecurity and even more so after this incident in church. Later in the day

I talked to my Ugandan research assistant, who also got a bit worried and promised to pray for me and my family. But as soon as she learned that the church had already prayed for me she relaxed and assured me there would be no problem.

I interpret this event as an attempt to negotiate my participation in the church through my active response to the invitation to come forward and be prayed for. The pastor was, again, not questioning my faith, but invited me to take part in a religious practice.

At a different occasion the female head pastor of a church expressed concern about my spiritual life. She preferred this to be the topic of our conversation, rather than the questions I had prepared for my interview with her. While talking I realised that it was the fact that I did not bring along a Bible (as did most other church goers) that had raised the concern. Again the question did not directly touch upon my inner life, but was related to specific practices of faith and religious teaching.

Degrees of Belief

In order to make sense of the above fieldwork experiences I suggest that belief should be approached not as a question of either/or, or of an inner state, but instead in terms of different *degrees of belief*. I thereby question uncritically privileging a focus on belief as an inner experience. The approach moreover implies, as mentioned in the beginning of this article, perceiving belief as being related context, to practices and ritual and as part of social relations.

My first fieldwork experiences, when I questioned my own sincerity (was I fake, blasphemous, what was my inner life?), reflected a perception of belief as being either true or false and as something going on inside an individual that can (sometimes) be discerned through religious practices. This perception is based in what Lindquist and Coleman (2008) name 'a post-Enlightenment emphasis on religion as a cognitive system' where '[r]eligious beliefs not only could be seen as means to explain the natural world but also could ultimately be proved to be "true" or "false"' (2008: 2-3) as well as the aforementioned Western Christian understanding of belief as being a reflection of our inner state.

At the more abstract level we are dealing with longstanding discussions of belief in the study of religion and the religious lives of people and of the relationship between belief and rituals (as inward and outward) (Lindquist and Coleman 2008: 3). It is not within the scope or capacity of this article to delve into these abstract conceptual problems, but simply to discuss the observation and experience that belief can take different forms and shapes according to contexts and to one's openness. This observation implies that I do not dismiss the category of belief altogether (see also Luhrmann 2010), but I do not privilege an understanding of belief that is related to our inner selves.

The understanding of belief as varying *degrees of belief* that I suggest as my lens of understanding is first closely related, first, to context and, second, to experiences of familiarity. This indicates that there is not one overall or overarching understanding of belief that is referred to, but rather that the experience of belief is closely related to both formalised rituals and less formal religious practices. So belief in this particular case is not about cognitive schemes or understandings of the world, nor about a way to exist in the world or a specific commitment (Lindquist and Coleman 2008: 7). It is in a certain sense diffuse and more about openness to belief and belief as an affective and emotional experience that involves attachment and social relations (ibid.).

Moreover, the experience of feeling at home and having some sort of shared identity with the people I worshipped and worked with shows that belief was not a matter of chronological development (going from being a non-believer to a believer). There is here an interesting link between familiarity and belief.

At a different level the question of belief is about how religious identity and belief shapes the fieldwork we do and how we deal with it in an ethically and personally acceptable way? As described above, this differed according to what was being studied and how this was done. One notable observation that is worth remark is that I was not often asked about whether I was a believer or not, but more often questions around what church I belong to, what my role in church was, or whether I was saved or born-again. This stands in contrast to my own initial concern about whether I was sincere or not. This is of course related to how I presented myself (as a protestant), but I think it is also alludes to an understanding of belief that is related to practice and that maybe also allows for doubt and more diffuse forms of

belief (that does not necessarily entails questions of non-belief – see also Blanes (2006: 225) for similar reflections).

Reflections around how we deal with the ‘problem of belief’ also allow us to think about what is at stake when engaging in and negotiating insider / outsider relations in fieldwork situations. Is it merely a question of belief or are there other issues at stake as well? Another side to it is the question of being made sense of by other people; being made sense of in relation to a different landscape or view of the world where belief might not be thought of as an inner state or be the only or most important issue that people consider. As Bielo points out ‘From our first entry into the field through our extended stays, we are placed into local categories. We are rendered meaningful in local terms’ (2013: 5). This perspective can also add to our insight about what the people we study and work with understand by belief.

Openness to both the possibility of belief and to people’s own perception of belief prompts the question of whether we only can comprehend if we share. And if so, what do we share?

Albeit, approaching religion and religious experiences as ‘social facts’ and as established through practice and social relations, there is an important difference in allowing for others (in comprehensive terms) to believe and for not altogether taking it into consideration. Therefore the possibility of belief and the openness to belief are important aspects when approaching and being in the field.

Conclusion

This article began with using the chameleon as a metaphor for the fieldwork experiences described and discussed throughout this article: to being more religious when doing fieldwork than at other times, to changing colour with the changing circumstances, or adapting one’s subjectivity to the present context.

By drawing on personal fieldwork experience I have discussed how to think about belief in relation to doing fieldwork in religious settings and institutions and how it influences our understanding of people’s religious lives. I have argued that belief is not constant, in the sense that one can for example be a

believer, a sceptical believer, and a non-believer at different times according to different contexts. Therefore the insider / outsider and believer / non-believer schism may not be the only or most central issue to consider when reflecting on our positioning in the field. Referring to Engelke's discussion about the 'problem of belief' I assert that the question of how open we are about belief and spirituality more generally is equally important. As Engelke writes 'the problem of belief is raised and left open, and the ethnography, I think, is richer for it' (2002: 3). In other words, the important matter is not our personal belief per se, but whether we as ethnographers are open to the possibility of its existence.

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